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LOCAL COMMENT: Waterway system depends on environmentally safe solutions

June 11, 2004

BY THOMAS H. MAGNESS

Sustaining our Great Lakes waterway system requires win-win solutions -- those that possess both economic and environmental benefits.

We need to take a holistic look at the waterway system, develop a shared vision for its future, and take decisive steps in that direction. That requires a deliberate, balanced collaboration of partners and stakeholders.

For the long term, partners and stakeholders must determine:

- If the current navigation system is being maintained at an appropriate level to meet the needs of a growing economy.
- If the Great Lakes navigation system is part of the regional, national, international transportation mix.
- If there are technological solutions to manage sediments in navigation channels in a more cost-competitive yet environmentally responsible way.
- If maritime commerce is the most environmentally sustainable and cost-effective means of moving bulk commerce within the region, or if investments should be made elsewhere -- even if outside the navigation system.
- If all regional and national stakeholders are communicating effectively to generate informed decisions.

Initial steps are already being taken. President George W. Bush's administration demonstrated its commitment to the sustainable future of this international waterway by including funding for the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Seaway Study in the 2005 Corps of Engineers budget. The United States and Canada have signed a memorandum of cooperation toward assessing the waterway's current and future needs.

The Corps of Engineers and Transport Canada are now nearly a year into an assessment of the waterway's baseline physical, environmental and economic condition. Experts from the Corps of Engineers, Transport Canada, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Environment Canada, and the U.S. and Canadian Seaway authorities are collecting data, which will enable the United States and Canada to objectively evaluate benefits and costs of future scenarios.

Notwithstanding suggestions from some that we've finished learning about the complexities of the waterway, the truth is we've got a long way to go. Over the course of the next six weeks, we and our partners will hold meetings on the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Seaway Study to hear from the public. The waterway's stakeholders, especially those in environmental, navigation and related maritime industries, must get involved and commit to serving as part of the study team.

The state of the current navigation system requires a similar, balanced approach.

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The present situation -- dredging challenges and deteriorating infrastructure in the system's ports, harbors and connecting channels -- challenges our region's ability to maintain a viable maritime commerce system. With some 200 million tons of commerce moved annually on the waterway system, these are critical issues with environmental and economic security implications.

We must resolutely seek win-win opportunities for a slate of priorities typically thought of as incompatible.

Examples include: maintaining an aging infrastructure while curtailing invasive species; maintaining safe navigation channels while containing or removing contaminated sediments; addressing port capacities while restoring wetlands; and providing a competitive shipping environment while avoiding dramatic water level fluctuations.

Like the rest of our teammates, the Corps of Engineers understands the need to balance economic vitality and human activity with the mandate of environmental sustainability. We are committed to addressing these challenges but we clearly cannot answer all of the questions without help from others.

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